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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002258

SIPDIS

FOR WHA A/S NORIEGA AND NSC SHANNON FROM BROWNFIELD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/25/2010

TAGS: [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: THE CHURCH (FINALLY) STIRS IN VENEZUELA

REF: CARACAS 02206

Classified By: WILLIAM R. BROWNFIELD FOR REASON 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action request. See Para. 8.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY. After a year of relative silence, the Venezuelan Church has come alive in challenging President Hugo Chavez's authoritarian tendencies. Chavez has counterattacked viciously. The Vatican in-country representatives are not supporting the Venezuelan Church's recent activism. We need allies here in Venezuela, and the Church may be the best possible choice for reaching out to the poor communities. Ambassador recommends that we reach out to the Church leadership in the Vatican, the Papal Nuncio in Washington, and the U.S. Church leadership to urge public and clear support for the Venezuelan Church in their challenge to Chavez. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (C) After several years as a strong player in Venezuela, Chavez drama, the Catholic Church refrained from active engagement through most of 2004 and 2005. Church leaders made few political pronouncements, and their engagement with us was low key. The Church's silence was probably driven by three factors:

- Desire to tone down the rhetoric and explore a modus vivendi following Chavez, August 2004 recall referendum victory.
- Concern that Chavez was undercutting Church control of its own institutions by inserting revolutionary representatives in their schools and social programs.
- Desire to name a new Archbishop of Caracas, traditionally the senior prelate in Venezuela, over whose naming Chavez holds a veto under the Vatican-Venezuela Concordat of 1964.

[1](#)4. (C) Embassy policy over the past year has been to engage the Church as far as they are willing, but low key in deference to their sensitivities. USAID has supported Catholic schools, orphanages, senior centers, day care, street children and health centers. I have visited as many as possible on my in-country travel, emphasizing our desire to support and work with the Church in poor communities. I met quietly with Archbishop Baltazar Porras of Merida (head of the Episcopal Conference) and other senior prelates several times. I emphasized our willingness to support them with a positive message of outreach to the Venezuelan poor.

[1](#)5. (C) The former Vatican representative in Venezuela, Mons. Dupuy (French), was tougher on Chavez than was the Venezuelan Church. As Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the Nuncio made no effort to conceal his skepticism about Chavez, authoritarian tendencies, infuriating Chavez by reading at one diplomatic event a letter lightly suggesting some concerns. Dupuy departed Caracas in April 2005.

[1](#)6. (C) The Church came to life in June. Archbishop Porras told me in May that he was going to be more open in his criticism of Chavez when he crossed democracy red lines, and he has been good to his word. Chavez supporters responded graciously by suggesting he had stolen Church funds and should be prosecuted. Retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara unloaded on Chavez authoritarian tendencies in early July (reftel). Chavez responded that he was a demon who should be sent to Hell. Other senior Church leaders (as well as opposition leaders and the press) came to the Cardinal's defense.

[1](#)7. (C) After more than a year biding their time, the Church has come to life in Venezuela. Paradoxically, the Vatican representatives are moving in the opposite direction. The new Nuncio, who has been at post for three months and presented credentials, has offered no public comment in defense of the national Church leadership. His deputy (please protect) tells us that he arrived with instructions to normalize relations with Chavez. The Nuncio has not responded to my three invitations for a low profile meeting, a clear sign that he is nervous about annoying Chavez. Wealthy businessman and philanthropist Alberto Vollmer (protect) told me last week that he brought a message to

Chavez from Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano in May that the Vatican had withdrawn their previous Nuncio, refrained from critical commentary; and proposed noncontroversial Archbishop of Valencia Jorge Urosa Savinoas the new Archbishop of Caracas; they now wanted Chavez, concurrence. To be fair, Vollmer said his message also carried an implied threat that the Vatican would abrogate the Concordat and name the Archbishop unilaterally if Chavez did not soon agree.

18. (C) At risk of belaboring the obvious, we could use some allies down here. The opposition parties are in disarray,

organized labor and business are intimidated, the NGO,s are nervous, and the media very careful. The Church is perhaps the only institution in Venezuela today that can take on Chavez head-to-head in the poor communities that represent his political base. I do not want to wrap the Church in a giant, public U.S. Government hug. I do not want to push them into a negative posture, or go further in challenging Chavez than they are comfortable going. But I want to make clear to them here, in Washington, and in the Vatican that they are not alone, and we will support them. I suggest three steps we can take right now:

- First, reach out directly to senior Church leadership in the Vatican at the highest possible level. Emphasize that the GOV is showing many of the same signals to the Church today that Cuba showed in the 1960,s. It is in the Vatican,s interest to take clear, objective positions on democracy, human rights, freedom of religion, and respect for the Church. We are not suggesting that the Vatican get out in front of the Venezuelan Church, only that it support them.

- Second, reach out to the Papal Nuncio in Washington at the highest possible level. Same message.

- Third, engage the U.S. Church hierarchy. Archbishop Porras is a good friend of the Archbishop of Washington. If the Venezuelan Church is going to take on the Chavez project, they must be certain they have support from the Vatican and other national Church leaderships. The U.S. Church is a good place to start. A robust exchange program and some U.S. missions to Venezuela would be a good way to do it.
Brownfield

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